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Author

Eyring, Janet L.

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JANET L. EYRING
California State University, Fullerton

Service-Learning at the Secondary Level: An Interview With a High School Principal

Background: Florin High School is in Elk Grove Unified School District in Sacramento County, California. According to the 2006 Academic Performance Index (API) Growth School Report, 585 out of 1,373, or 42.6% of the school population, are English learners from a variety of language backgrounds, the largest of which are Asian and Hispanic. This interview with Mark Cerutti, principal of Florin High School, took place on October 10, 2006.

1. What is the history of your service-learning requirement at Florin High School in Elk Grove, California?

Florin is designed around a series of specialized academic programs, some of which are state-certificated academies (Agriculture Technology, Business Education Technology, Music and Arts Scholars Consortium, Navy JROTC, Interactive Communications and Media, Insights High School, as well as others). Service-learning is embedded in these small learning communities as a required component. When the “small learning communities” began on this campus, a service-learning requirement was instituted. Now most of our academies have a service-learning requirement. Our EL students find themselves integrated into these learning communities based upon the language fluency and, of course, interest levels. As such they are drawn into service-learning opportunities as a natural extension of the small learning community program.

2. When and where do your students do service-learning? What community partners do you have? What is the nature of your requirement?

Florin High School is situated in an area that does not have major corporate offices and minimal retail businesses. Our community partnerships tend to be more closely linked with other service agencies such as People Reaching Out (partnering high school students with our feeder elementary schools) and Parent Institute for Quality Education (PIQE), an organization that targets the parents of our EL students. Some of our academies are closely linked with the Future Farmers of America (FFA), state fair, and most recently we have begun to explore the possibility of a partnership with the Sacramento Rivercats (the Triple A farm team for the Oakland As). All of these partnerships act as an extension of services we provide students and expand our opportunities outside of the classroom and into the community.

3. How successful has the requirement been for nonnative speakers? Do you feel that this is valuable experience for English learners? If so, what kinds of benefits do you think they have obtained?

It depends on the student and his/her background and level of English fluency. A service-learning project would be very difficult to monitor for our EL students level 3 and below. Most of our level 4 and 5 students are in programs that do have a service-learning component. In addition, many of our students come from backgrounds which limit the activity outside the home (especially for females). To make a blanket requirement without any flexibility for these situations would not be helpful for our students. The staff and administration overall and particularly our EL and service-learning coordinator have been overwhelmingly supportive of this. As is noted above, there does need to be a coordination and alignment of experience to language fluency. The cultural aspects of this must also be given serious consideration.

The benefits are learning to do service for the sake of service, interaction with English speakers, and interaction with other cultures. An estimate of the percentage of EL students participating is 50%. We may be seeing a slight decline as recent students entering our school are entering at levels 1 and 2 where service-learning opportunities are more limited.

4. *What role do parents have in facilitating service-learning assignments? How does your senior project relate to service-learning?*

We do have instances where parents don't understand the concept. In some cases they have inadvertently impeded the students from signing up or following through with service-learning projects. The language barrier between school and the homes of EL students is an ongoing school service area we are focusing on (PIQE, noted above, is an example at targeting this). One area of our school requirement is our senior project. This is a pivotal aspect of Florin's overall education experience. It is a culminating learning experience where students connect directly with a staff member and collaboratively they design, develop, and implement a senior project. Many students opt for service-learning-based projects. In cases where there is either a student or parent language barrier, teachers are aware to let the EL coordinator know of the situation. We do have bilingual teaching associates that offer great assistance in bridging the language gap between school and home. This has been a tremendous resource in maintaining desired levels of participation in these service-learning opportunities for our EL students.

5. *Have there been any formal attempts to evaluate the effects of service-learning at your school? If so, what have you found? If not, do you have plans for evaluation in the future?*

This is a priority area for Florin High School. While we focus heavily on data analysis and utilization specific to student achieve-

ment and instruction, program evaluation is something that is a targeted area of focus for the '07/'08 school year. I have utilized the logic model of program evaluation specific to several of our specialized academic programs but specific to service-learning, this has not been done. In time the data will be available and it will be embedded within the program evaluations for all of our specialized programs.

6. *What are some hints for other schools that might wish to incorporate a service-learning requirement successfully in the future?*

Service-learning is something that has been a buzz term for a while. In order for there to be tangible results (meaning high levels of student participation as well as school-parent-community partnering), we have found the key to be having it institutionalized within the day-to-day learning process and program. Another significant aspect of this is dedicating the human resources to manage and facilitate these programs. They are labor and time intensive. Involving parents in the planning of the program and continually communicating the purpose, intent, and benefits is essential. This must be done using every available communicative resource and venue. Flexibility with parents who have cultural or religious reasons for not letting their children into the community outside of the school day is also critical. Linking service-learning programs with parent-school collaboration initiatives can be an effective way to leverage resources as well as combine program funding.

7. *Any other comments?*

At Florin High School we feel as if we are constantly in a learning mode. We have made significant strides in effectively working with our EL populations as is demonstrated by our growth in both math and ELA student achievement data (STAR data). Our entire staff is focusing on effective EL instructional strategies and moving them beyond the designated EL or SDAIE courses.

Allowing our EL students to access and experience success in the community provides invaluable, real-world learning and language utilization opportunities. The resource demands and diminishing availability of resources have required us to become aggressive community partners.

Having staff members who are knowledgeable of and connected with the community is important. Our adult population is a cornerstone for our ongoing efforts to expand and improve upon our service-learning program and specifically target our EL learners as part of this inclusive learning process.